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Experts dispute meaning of KGB officer's return

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WASHINGTON — The spectacular redefection of Soviet spy Vitaly Yurchenko upset official Washington yesterday, with one expert saying the turnabout "leaves a lot of people with a lot of egg on their faces in the intelligence community."

"This could take a long time to repair," said a former senior official of the Central Intelligence Agency.

But other intelligence professionals minimized Mr. Yurchenko's surprise decision, maintaining that information disclosed in his three months under questioning made the whole exchange a net plus for the United States.

At the Capitol, key Democrats said the incident had shaken legislators' confidence in the CIA and its director, William J. Casey. Mr. Casey had personally vouched that Mr. Yurchenko was a bona fide defector, according to Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Mr. Leahy said the reversal might have damaged U.S. intelligence operations. "The concern is very real that the man is a double agent, was a double agent and always was," he said.

But a White House official responded by saying, "There's no feeling that someone screwed up."

Two former CIA directors and some other specialists largely discounted suggestions that Mr. Yurchenko might have been a "plant," assigned by Moscow to embarrass the U.S. side by faking a defection and then pretending to change his mind.

They also doubted that the startling switch in the Yurchenko case had any relation to the forthcoming summit meeting between President Reagan and the Soviet leader, Mikhail S. Gorbachev.

Richard Helms, CIA chief from 1965 to 1973, said it was "unlikely" that the KGB would have sent a high-ranking officer like Mr. Yurchenko to dupe its American competitors. "If you did that, you wouldn't send along somebody who knows all your best secrets," he said.

William E. Colby, who ran the agency from 1973 to 1976, agreed. Both men also said such a change of heart was not an uncommon event in intelligence work.

"This sort of thing happens every now and then," Mr. Colby said. "People defect and then decide to go back because they can't stand the psychological strain of separation from their old life.

"Mr. Casey should get praise rather than criticism for the net results of the Yurchenko venture."

Mr. Colby noted that the KGB had lost three senior officers by defection in recent months. If that happened to the CIA "we'd be in an uproar," he added. "Instead, we've lost some tawdry little spies being paid a few thousand dollars. It's not the same thing at all."

Harry Rositzke, who spent 20 years as a CIA specialist in Soviet operations and counterintelligence, said, "There's no reason whatsoever to think Yurchenko was a plant. If you plant somebody, you do it for a purpose. You don't send somebody with a lot of classified information in his head."

George Carver, former deputy director of the agency, acknowledged that the episode was obviously an intelligence embarrassment and "it's obviously awkward." He was the man who said it left intelligence officials with "egg on their faces."

On balance, however, the KGB's recent troubles outweigh those of the CIA, he suggested. Mr. Yurchenko's assertions that he was kidnapped and drugged were "scripted by the Soviets," he said. "It's not that we are incapable of evil and people don't do stupid things, but nobody would do anything that stupid in this day of oversight committees and the press."

But there was more suspicion in Congress, where Mr. Leahy said, "There are an awful lot of angry senators in both parties on this matter. . . . I'm one of them."

He said many of his colleagues had had strong doubts about the authenticity of the Yurchenko defection, and had been assured by Mr. Casey. "You assume the CIA knows what they're doing," the senator said. "That's an assumption that's now being questioned."

Allen E. Goodman, a former CIA analyst now at Georgetown University, also said he thought Mr. Yurchenko had been "lying from the beginning, probably a plant to embarrass the U.S. at a summit where human rights will be discussed."

Rather than seeing Mr. Yurchenko's switch as a CIA failure, he said the agency might have suspected he was a plant and intentionally gave him the opportunity to run back to Soviet custody.

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Representative Bob Livingston, R-La., a member of the House Intelligence Committee, said the defection was "a legitimate deal gone sour. But we got a lot more than we gave," he said. "We might have been lax, but we weren't wrong."

Assessing damage to the CIA, Mr. Carver said that any Soviet agent considering defection now probably would have doubts about coming to the American side. "The KGB has shown its arm is very long and that the United States — well, don't believe their promises of supporting you. . . . This could take a long time to repair."

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Some observers believed Mr. Yurchenko might have decided to go back home after reading in the U.S. press about disclosures he reportedly made to the CIA. One was about Edward Howard, a CIA officer who may have tipped off the KGB about a Russian working for the CIA in Moscow and who then fled the United States before he could be arrested.

"Too much talk is deleterious," former CIA Director Helms said.

There also was speculation that Mr. Yurchenko's original defection might not have been ideological, but personal.

According to reports, Mr. Yurchenko, when stationed here earlier, had an affair with the wife of a colleague now posted in Canada. After defecting, he allegedly spoke with her. When she refused to resume the affair, he decided to redefect.

Asked about this version, a White House official said, "We have reason to believe there is something to it."

Correspondent Nancy J. Schwerzler of The Sun's Washington Bureau contributed to this article.

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